

# Jalna Hanmer obituary

Feminist campaigner and scholar who established one of Britain's first courses in women's studies

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Hanmer while at Bradford University  
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In the 1970s the academic field of sociology in Britain was dominated by men. Jalna Hanmer was at the vanguard of change after founding one of Britain's first courses in women's studies at Bradford University in 1977.

The course helped to bring the issue of violence against women into the scholarly fold. Though rape and sexual abuse of girls were regularly covered by the media, academia was yet to address it as an area of serious concern.

With Hilary Rose, head of the sociology department, and Sheila Allen, the university's first female professor (of sociology), Hanmer persuaded the all-male university board that starting a women's department would require little funding. The next challenge was to convince them that this was an area worth researching.

"I remember thinking; 'How can I make violence against women seem like an academic subject?' " recalled the American-born Hanmer, who would become one of Britain's first professors of women's studies. The answer was twofold; first she turned her focus on to the male perpetrators of sexual violence, rather than the victims — the standard line of inquiry. Then she interviewed the victims, the police force and the criminal justice agencies. In her magnum opus, *Women, Violence and Crime Prevention* (1993), which examines the social structures that sustain violence against women, and issues such as financial exploitation and domestic labour, she interviewed 60 women, many living in refuges, in West Yorkshire — half of whom were of Asian origins, mostly from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. She also delved into West Yorkshire police records to examine how they dealt with domestic abuse. Her calls for reform were specific and, for the most part, realised: these included hiring and promoting more female officers; issuing guidelines to all officers attending domestic violence callouts; a mandate that officers treat domestic abuse as a crime, rather than a civil or family dispute; and founding a specialist unit of trained officers in West Yorkshire, a policy that spread across the UK and evolved into the Domestic Violence Units.

She was born Jalna Alyce Alderman in 1931 in Walla Walla, Washington state, to Nevin Alderman, a newspaper printer, and Marie (née Donley), who owned a restaurant. When her parents divorced in 1944 she moved to California, where she studied sociology and social institutions at the University of California, Berkeley, graduating in 1956.

After moving to La Rochelle in southwest France, she met and married Charles Hanmer, an English artist who lived on a boat. They moved to the UK in 1959 and divorced a few years later. In London she lived for 15 years with the playwright Leonard Webb, with whom she had two children: Stephen, who died in an accident in 1979, and Laurence, a sales director for eastern Europe, who survives her. From 1980 she was in a relationship with Sheila Saunders, founder of Jewish Women's Aid, until Saunders' death in 2013.



Hanmer in later life

During the Sixties Hanmer worked for a tenants' housing association and from 1974 lectured in sociology at LSE, until she moved north in 1977. It was a decade of political activism: she chaired the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and played a leading role in the women's liberation movement, helping to organise a national conference and meetings for women in Hampstead, northwest London, where she lived, to discuss discrimination against women, equal opportunities and domestic violence. "They were angry about it, which is good," she recalled. "What you want is to be angry. Without it you can't do anything."

In 1974 she had founded the Women's Aid Federation, which became Women's Aid; two years later she took some women from the charity's refuges to the international tribunal on crimes against women in Brussels, where they spoke about living with domestic violence.

She was also one of the key organisers of the International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship in Brighton, a week-long conference in 1996, which brought together 3,000 delegates from 130 countries to discuss issues such as sexual abuse, the sex trade, pornography and violence against women in the military. She put her sister Joan on the complaints desk, which was flooded with American academics complaining that the pillows were too hard. It remains one of the largest feminist gatherings in Europe.

In 2018 Hanmer founded the Campaign to Eliminate the Leeds Sex Trade (CELST), which challenged the UK's first designated legal prostitution area, the "managed zone".

“This woman changed the course of my life,” said the feminist writer Julie Bindel, who recalled how Hanmer had a way of commanding respect from even the most powerful of uniformed men.

Hanmer herself reflected later in life: “We thought we were the first women to discover violence against women. Then, when we learnt something about women’s history, the questions became ‘How did we forget?’, ‘Will we forget again?’ ”